REAL

M.R.ALO

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A Novel

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For everyone who has ever kept a light on for someone who wasn't coming back.

Some things are gone. Some things are only put away. The hardest part of loving a family is learning, year by year, which is which — and loving them anyway when you never quite find out.

A Note Before You Begin

This is a family story before it is a mystery. Nothing in these pages will be fully solved, and that is by design — the same way a family rarely agrees, even at the end of a long life, on exactly what happened and to whom. Read it once for the people in it. If you find yourself wanting to read it again, you will notice that very little in this house ever says quite the same thing twice.

The Alon Family

Rey — grandfather; a lifelong researcher of memory

Grace — grandmother; keeper of a garden and of certain other things

Reggie — their son; an architect; father to three daughters

Mike — Reggie's brother; a realist by long practice

Mocha — Reggie's sister; the family's archivist

Marielle — Reggie's eldest daughter; a medical student

Lara — Reggie's middle daughter; an artist

Phoebe — Reggie's youngest daughter; seven years old

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PART ONE — SLIDING DOORS

Prologue — The Reel Stops

There is a sound a projector makes right before it dies: not a click, but a sigh — the soft mechanical exhale of film catching where it was never meant to catch, then the frame freezing, then the burn, that smell of scorched acetate that clings to a room for days.

Rey had watched that frame burn a hundred times. A little girl in a dress the color of old honey, mid-laugh, forever failing to finish it, because the film always caught at the same frame, as though the projector had appointed itself her guardian. He never fixed it. He could have, in an afternoon, between breakfast and the evening news. He let it burn every time, because some part of him — the part that had spent a career studying how the mind protects itself, and had never once turned that mercy on his own — believed that if he ever saw the next frame, she would be older in it. He did not want her older.

He died in his study with the projector still warm.

They found him three days later, slumped in the leather chair that still smelled faintly of pipe tobacco though he'd quit forty years before, one hand resting on the reel canister the way you'd rest a hand on a good dog's head. On the desk: a journal, open, mid-sentence.

I have spent my whole life trying to prove that memory is not

That was all. Not memory is not real. Not memory is not reliable. Just — is not. As if the last word had simply declined to arrive.

The family came home for the funeral and stayed for the excavation — not of the yard, though there would be a shovel involved eventually, but of

the house itself, room by room, box by box, the slow archaeology every family performs after a death, pretending it is about paperwork and who gets the china, when really it is about finding the one drawer that explains the person.

They would not find that drawer. They would find seventeen drawers, each contradicting the last, and a house that seemed, in the weeks that followed, to have quietly decided it was no longer finished being lived in.

This is a story about all seventeen. It is also, though none of them would understand this for a while yet, a story about a girl who wore a dress the color of old honey in every memory that survived her — except the ones where, inexplicably, she didn't. One memory, near the very end, will put her in white. No one will ever agree on whose memory that one really belongs to.

Chapter One — The Phone Call

Reggie was standing in the school pickup line, engine idling, radio low, when his phone lit up with his brother's name and he felt a specific cold he already knew the shape of.

"Reg." Mike's voice had the flatness men use to keep from breaking. "It's Dad."

Reggie didn't ask what. He said, "Okay," which meant nothing and everything, and then, "I'll get the girls," which was the only true sentence available to him, because a man with three daughters does not fall apart in a school pickup line. He put the car in park. He watched Phoebe come skipping out first, seven and delighted by something no one else could see, and behind her Lara, thirteen, headphones halfway to her ears, and behind her Marielle, sixteen, walking like she was already rehearsing for a future where she'd have to be the responsible one.

He told them in the car, because waiting until they got home would have felt like a lie.

"Grandpa Rey died this morning."

Phoebe, from the back seat, asked, "Where did he go?"

It undid him more than tears would have. Marielle reached back and took her hand. Lara stared out the window and said nothing, which from Lara was its own kind of scream.

Twenty minutes later Phoebe asked whether Grandpa's dog would still be there, and Reggie had to explain that Grandpa hadn't had a dog in six

years. Phoebe considered this a personal betrayal for a full mile before announcing she was still hungry, and that this was an emergency deserving of the good gas station, not the bad one. Nobody laughed out loud. Everybody, privately, needed her to keep talking.

They drove five hours to the house on Alon Creek that night, the one with the wraparound porch and the fig tree Rey had planted the year Reggie was born, the one every grandchild had learned to swim behind, in the pond the family, out of some shared and unspoken agreement, had always called the lake.

Grace was on the porch when they arrived, sitting very straight in her rocking chair, dressed as though for church though it was nearly midnight. She looked at Reggie's headlights coming up the drive and smiled — not the confused smile of the last two years, but something clearer, something that made his chest ache before she even spoke.

"You're late," she said, when he came up the steps. "Your father waited as long as he could."

"I know, Ma."

"No." She held his face in both hands, the way she used to when he was small and had scraped a knee. "I mean tonight. He waited up for you. He kept saying, Reggie's coming, Reggie's coming, and then he just—" she made a small gesture, a bird lifting off a wire — "went."

It would be two more days before anyone told Reggie that his father had died alone in his study sometime before dawn, hours before Reggie had even left for work — which meant Rey could not have waited up for him at all that night. Mike would say later that Grace had simply lost her days, that the disease did that. Marielle would ask a hospice nurse whether

that kind of confusion was typical, and the nurse would say yes, all the time — and then add, almost as an afterthought, that she had never personally seen it arrive with quite that certainty, the specific confidence of someone reporting a fact rather than fumbling toward one. Nobody, including Grace, tried very hard to reconcile the two explanations. It was easier, that first night, to call it exhaustion.

Chapter Two — The House on Alon Creek

The house did what old houses do to grieving families: it got smaller. Every hallway Reggie remembered as vast now barely fit three daughters, their suitcases, Mike's ex-military efficiency, and Mocha's determined, brittle cheer. He noticed, too, that the hallway from the kitchen to the study seemed to run longer than his memory insisted it should — six strides as a boy, nine or ten now. He counted it twice, out loud once, under his breath, feeling foolish, and got eight the first time and ten the second, and decided a grieving man does not make a reliable surveyor.

Rey's old red pickup still sat in the side yard under a fig-tree shadow gone soft with dusk, exactly where it had always sat, its bed rusted through in one corner where his father had meant to get a liner and never had.

Mocha had already started boxing things — she'd flown in first, she always flew in first, and busy for Mocha meant labeling. BOOKS. KITCHEN. DAD'S DESK — DO NOT TOUCH, in a hand so firm it looked like a warning rather than an instruction.

"You didn't have to start already," Reggie said, standing in the doorway of the study, looking at the projector on its little wheeled cart, the canister beside it.

"Somebody has to," Mocha said, not looking up from the bookshelf. "You know how he was. If we don't sort it fast, it'll sort us instead."

"That's an odd way to put it."

"Is it." She finally looked at him, and something in her face closed like a hand. "You've been in this house four hours, Reg. Give it time."

Marielle wandered the hallway reading the framed photographs the way she read everything — for evidence. Rey and Grace's wedding, 1968. Reggie as a fat, furious infant. Mike and Reggie, maybe six and eight, fishing off a dock. Mocha's confirmation. A school photo of Reggie around age seven, missing a front tooth, grinning like he'd gotten away with something.

She stopped at that one longer than the others. There was something about the frame itself — an old brass one — that looked rehung. A slightly different shade of wall behind it, a ghost-rectangle a half-inch larger than the frame currently there, as though something bigger had once hung in that exact spot and been quietly replaced by something smaller and safer to look at. She ran a finger along the edge, and it was dusty in a way the rest of the wall wasn't — recent, not decades old. She filed the fact away with the discomfort of someone realizing the mystery she's circling might not be history at all, but weather.

She didn't mention it that night.

Unable to sleep in the unfamiliar quiet of a house that had never once been quiet in her lifetime, Marielle went looking for water and found Lara already in the kitchen, sitting on the counter in the dark, eating cereal dry from the box.

"Can't sleep either," Lara said. Not a question.

"This house feels wrong with him gone."

"It felt wrong before he was gone." When Marielle looked at her, Lara shrugged. "Last time we visited. Two summers ago. Remember how Grandma kept setting a fifth plate?"

"There's five of us when we visit."

"That's four grandkids and a grandma. Five plates for five people. But she set six." Lara hopped down from the counter. "I counted. I always count."

Marielle wanted to say she has Alzheimer's, Lara, she just miscounted, and it would have been true, and it would have been the kind of true that ends a conversation instead of opening one. She didn't say it. She just nodded, because some nights the kindest thing between sisters is silence shared instead of logic offered — and because some small cold part of her had already begun, without her permission, counting too.

"You always do this," Marielle said, softer than she meant it. "Turn everything into a puzzle. Sometimes a plate's just a plate."

"Sure." Lara didn't sound hurt, which somehow made it worse. "You always do this too. Decide what's evidence before you've actually looked at it."

Neither of them apologized. They split the rest of the cereal in a silence that wasn't quite peace and wasn't quite a fight, and went back to their separate rooms, and lay awake separately, doing the same math.

Chapter Three — What Mocha Carries

By midnight the house had stopped feeling like a crime scene and started, faintly, to feel like a kitchen again, mostly because Mocha would not allow otherwise.

"Nobody in this family remembers to eat when they're grieving," she announced, cracking eggs into a bowl with more force than the eggs required. "That's rule one. Sit."

Nobody argued. Ten years of family gatherings had taught all of them that arguing with Mocha over food was a battle no one had ever won — not even Rey, who had spent fifty years trying to convince his sister that grief and hunger were unrelated conditions, and failed every time.

Reggie sat at the counter and watched her work, and for a moment it was almost pleasant, the particular comfort of watching someone who loves you do something competent with their hands.

"You flew in this morning," he said. "Before any of us even knew."

"I always fly in first." She didn't look up from the pan. "Someone has to turn the water back on and check what's expired before the rest of you show up expecting a functioning kitchen. It's not a virtue, Reg. It's a logistics problem I happen to be good at solving."

"It's a little bit a virtue."

"Don't." But she almost smiled.

Phoebe, cross-legged on the counter stool, watched the eggs with the seriousness of a scientist. "Can I crack one?"

"Absolutely not, you'll get shell in it."

"Grandpa let me."

"Grandpa," Mocha said, handing her an egg anyway, "let you do a lot of things I spent forty years cleaning up after." Her voice had gone soft doing it, and when Phoebe's first attempt produced more shell than egg, Mocha didn't scold her, just fished the pieces out with two fingers and said, "Try again, you'll get it," in the exact patient tone Grace probably used on all of them once.

Mike wandered through at half past midnight in sweatpants, looking for coffee he wasn't going to find this late, and the three siblings fell into a shorthand thirty years deep — Mocha handing him a mug of decaf and calling it coffee, Mike drinking it without checking.

"You know this is decaf," Mike said, three sips in.

"I know."

"Every single time."

"Every single time," Mocha agreed, not sorry at all, "because every single time you drink it like it's real and go straight to bed after, which tells me everything I need to know about how much of this family's coffee habit was ever really about the caffeine." Mike opened his mouth to argue and found, as he always did, that he had nothing.

"You didn't have to make eggs," he said.

"No," Mocha agreed. "I wanted to. There's a difference, and you'd know it if you ever let anyone do anything for you."

It was, on the surface, a small joke. It landed somewhere deeper than that, and all three of them let it pass without following it further.

Later, after the plates were cleared and the girls had gone up to bed, Mocha stood alone at the sink a long time, hands in dishwater gone cold. She had set out six placemats without thinking — an old muscle memory from a kitchen that hadn't needed a sixth in forty years — and caught herself and put the extra one away before anyone noticed.

On the top shelf of the pantry, behind the good china no one used, sat a hatbox she had not opened since she was fourteen. She did not go near it that night. She simply knew, the way you know where an old bruise is with your eyes closed, exactly which shelf it occupied.

Then she dried her hands, turned off the kitchen light, and went to bed, because morning would come whether or not she'd resolved anything, and somebody in this family had always had to be the one who got up first.

Chapter Four — The First Journal

The reading of the will was small and mercifully brief — the house to Grace for her lifetime, then split among the three siblings; some savings; the fishing boat to Mike, who cried harder over the boat than he had at the funeral, which surprised no one who knew him.

But it was the study that held what mattered, and it was Phoebe — small, unglamorous, overlooked Phoebe — who found the first journal. She had crawled under the desk to retrieve a rolling marble and found instead a loose floorboard, and beneath it a tin box, and inside the tin box, journals bound with brittle rubber bands that snapped at the touch.

"Daddy," Phoebe said, dragging the box into the hallway light. "Grandpa had a secret desk."

Reggie sat on the floor with his daughter and opened the journal on top — not the oldest, not the newest, just whichever happened to be facing up, which felt, in hindsight, like the house's first small joke at their expense, because of every year Rey could have left on top, he — or fate, or the settling of an old tin box — chose the year Reggie turned seven.

March 14th. R. asked me today why some memories feel like they happened to someone else. I told him that's normal, that the brain edits and re-edits like film, cutting what it can't bear and splicing in what it needs. He asked whose job it is to do the splicing. I didn't have an answer. I still don't.

"Which girl?" Phoebe asked.

Reggie didn't answer. He was staring at a name three lines down, in his father's handwriting, written with the aching familiarity of a man writing about someone he'd known his whole life.

Real would have been eleven this year.

He closed the journal.

"Dad?" Phoebe said. "Who's Real?"

"I don't know, baby," Reggie said, and it was the first true thing and the first lie he told in the same breath.

He waited until Phoebe had wandered off, sorting the rest of the journals by rubber-band color, and then — instead of putting the tin box away for later the way the old Reggie would have, the way a man who let things happen to him would have — he went through it himself, page by page, alone on the study floor, for the better part of an hour, because he had decided, somewhere between the name and his daughter's question, that he was done finding things out by accident.

That was how he found the folder. Not tucked with the journals but beneath them, at the very bottom of the tin, a manila sleeve gone soft with age, and inside it a single photocopied sheet: a hospital birth record. Twins. Fourteen minutes apart. Baby A: Reginald. Baby B: Realyn. The birthday on the sheet was a day earlier than the one he'd celebrated his whole life.

He sat with it a long time before he did anything else. Then he folded it, put it in his shirt pocket, and did not show it to Phoebe, and did not show it, that night, to anyone.

He also did not mention, to Phoebe or to anyone, a second slip of paper he'd found tucked loose between two pages further back in the same journal, in a hand recognizably Rey's but hurried, almost angry, three words underlined twice: Or I invented her. He put it back exactly where he found it, and carried it, unexamined, the way he had apparently been carrying a great many things for forty years already.

PART TWO — BLEED-THROUGH

Chapter Five — Grace's Garden

Grace kept a garden the way she kept everything now — beautifully, devotedly, with gaps no one wanted to name out loud. Marielle found her there the morning after the journal, kneeling in the tomato bed in her church dress, and sat down beside her in the dirt without being asked.

"Grandma, can I ask you something strange?"

"Depends how strange. Yesterday your uncle asked me if I remembered my own wedding, in that voice people use when they think you're already gone. I remembered every word of my vows and forgot his name for about four seconds. Strange isn't the problem around here, sweetheart. Everybody's just scared of the wrong parts of it." She kept working the soil. "What's your question."

"Do you know anyone named Real?"

Grace's hands went still over the soil. Then she smiled — that same clear, unclouded smile she'd worn on the porch the night Rey died — and said, "Of course I know Real. She used to sit right there." She pointed with her trowel at a patch of dirt beside the fig tree, empty, ordinary, indistinguishable from the rest of the yard. "Hated the sun on her shoulders. Loved anything with cinnamon in it — on toast, on oatmeal, once on a hard-boiled egg, God help us." She laughed, a short real laugh. "Her brother used to trade her his cinnamon toast for her bacon. Best deal either kid ever made and neither one of them knew it."

"Her brother," Marielle repeated carefully. "Who's her brother, Grandma?"

Something shifted behind Grace's eyes — not confusion, and not the pity Marielle would half-remember later, but something more ordinary and more devastating: a woman deciding, in real time, whether to hand a stranger something breakable.

"You'll have to ask your father that," Grace said. Then, gruffer, more like herself: "And don't you go making a project out of me, Marielle. I'm not a filing cabinet. I'm your grandmother, and I'd rather you sit here and pull weeds with me than write down everything I say like I'm a witness in a trial."

Marielle, chastened and a little relieved to be scolded like a person instead of studied like a symptom, pulled weeds.

"You're doing that thing again," Grace said eventually. "Going quiet so you can think harder. Your father does it too. Runs in the family, along with the stubbornness and, apparently, the gardening."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just hand me that trowel and think somewhere I can watch you do it."

Chapter Six — The Déjà Vu

Lara felt it first in the hallway outside the bathroom — a lurch, not physical, more like the floor of her memory tilting sideways for half a second. She had been in this exact spot before, at this exact hour, with this exact slant of morning light, someone's bare feet slapping down the hall behind her, a voice — a child's voice, high and delighted — calling a name that wasn't hers.

Real, wait for me!

She turned. No one was there. Phoebe's door was closed. The hallway smelled like lavender soap and nothing else.

She told herself it was exhaustion. She told herself the same thing three days later, sketching by the pond — she always sketched when she needed to think — when her pencil, without her permission, drew a second child standing at the water's edge beside the boy she'd meant to be her father at seven. She hadn't planned two children. There they were, holding hands, looking out at water rendered dark and glassy and somehow wrong. On the smaller child's wrist, three small loops of a line she hadn't consciously intended as string, and certainly not red — though she found herself reaching for the red pencil before she caught herself and didn't.

She tore the page out, folded it small, and put it in her pocket, but not before photographing it first, timestamped — a habit she'd have laughed at a week ago. She would look at that photograph again in nine days and find the girl in it wearing white instead of the yellow she distinctly remembered coloring.

There was another thing she hadn't told anyone, and wouldn't for a while: tucked in the same pocket as the folded page was an acceptance letter from a summer illustration program she'd been carrying around unopened for six days, the postmark older than the funeral. She had told herself there hadn't been a good moment. There had been several. She had let each one pass.

Chapter Seven — What Marielle Found in the Files

Marielle had inherited her father's rationalism and doubled it, the way second generations often sharpen what the first generation merely suggested. She did not believe in ghosts. She believed in incomplete data.

She already had her father's copy of the birth record — he had shown it to her two nights before, quietly, on the dock, the two of them turning it over like a thing that might explain itself if held at the right angle. What she wanted now was the rest of the file it had come from.

Rey's metal filing cabinet groaned like a ship when she pulled the drawers. Tax returns. Warranty cards for appliances long since replaced. Reggie and Mike's old report cards. And, tucked at the very back of the bottom drawer, a second document her father hadn't found: a photocopy of a hospital discharge ledger from the same week, water-damaged at one corner, listing a single infant discharged under the family surname. No twin noted at all. Baby, male, Alon family. Single birth.

Two documents. Two versions of the same week, both official-looking, both apparently authentic, flatly contradicting each other, with no seam anywhere she could find where either had been altered. If someone had faked the birth record forty years ago, they had done it with a level of period-accurate detail that would have required real letterhead, real stamps, knowledge of forms since changed twice over. If someone had altered the ledger instead, the water damage made it impossible to tell.

She carried the ledger to her father on the dock, this time, instead of holding it back.

"Dad," she said, "there's a second document. It says you were an only birth."

Reggie looked at both pages a long time. "Your grandmother told me I was an only child. Not once. Constantly. It was practically a bedtime story. You were always enough for us, Reggie, we never needed anyone else. I must have heard that sentence a hundred times growing up." He frowned, the way you frown at a word you've said so often it's stopped sounding like a word. "I always thought it was sweet. I'm standing here trying to remember if it was ever true, or if it was just the thing she needed me to believe until we both did."

A missing sibling was a mystery. A mother's constant, loving insistence that there had never been one was something closer to an architecture — built on purpose, maintained for decades. Neither of them mentioned it to anyone else that night. They were beginning, without discussing it, to keep this one between themselves.

Chapter Eight — The Losing Game

Not everything that week was the house rearranging itself. Some of it was just three sisters, cooped up too long, discovering they were bored.

"Candy Land is a baby game," Lara said, shuffling a deck of cards instead. "We're playing Speed."

"I don't know Speed," Phoebe said.

"Then you'll lose. That's how you learn things."

Phoebe lost four times in a row, with escalating outrage, and on the fifth loss declared that Lara was cheating, that the game itself was cheating, and that she did not want to play anymore — except she did, obviously, want to play, because she was still sitting at the table with her arms crossed and her eyes on the deck.

"I'm not cheating," Lara said. "You're just slow."

"I am not slow."

"You are extremely slow. It's okay. You're seven."

"I'm ALMOST eight."

Marielle finally intervened, not because the fight was serious but because Phoebe's voice had reached the register that meant tears were ninety seconds out. "New game. Loser has to be the dog for the winner for one full hour."

This solved everything, for reasons no adult in the house would ever fully understand. Phoebe lost the next hand and spent the following hour

crawling around after Lara on all fours, barking on command, thoroughly delighted with her own degradation, while Lara issued increasingly ridiculous instructions — fetch my sketchbook, good dog, sit, stay, speak.

It was one of the only entirely uncomplicated hours of the whole visit — no journals, no reels, no half-remembered names — and Marielle, watching from the hallway with her coffee going cold, found she had to look away for a second.

That night, brushing her teeth, Phoebe informed her father with great seriousness that dogs were the best possible thing a person could pretend to be, and asked whether Real had ever pretended to be one. Reggie, toothbrush halfway to his mouth, said he didn't know, and meant it, and found the not-knowing sat differently than it had a week ago — less like a wound, more like an ordinary gap.

He noticed, without remarking on it to anyone, that he had not once in five days walked the path down to the boathouse, though it was the shortest route from the porch to the dock and everyone else used it constantly. He took the long way, around by the fig tree, and told himself it was for the shade.

PART THREE — UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Chapter Nine — Mike's Warning

Mike found his brother on the dock and sat down on the boards without ceremony. "You need to stop them digging."

"Digging for what, Mike."

"Whatever this is. This Real business. Dad's journals, Mom's stories, the girls going around the house like it's an escape room." Mike's jaw worked the way it did when he was choosing violence over vulnerability and losing. "I watched you unravel once already over things that weren't there, and I am not doing it again. Not with your kids in the house."

"Once already," Reggie repeated. "When."

Mike looked at him a long moment, something passing behind his eyes like a door opening onto a hallway he hadn't intended to reveal. "You really don't remember," he said, quieter now. "The summer you were sixteen. Six weeks you don't have. Mom and Dad told everyone it was mono."

"It was mono."

"It was you, in this house, telling me you could hear someone in the water." Mike's voice cracked and he hated himself for it.

Reggie didn't let him walk away this time. "Tell me the rest of it, Mike. Not the version you've decided I can carry. All of it. I'm asking you directly, and I'm not going to ask twice, so make it count."

Mike stood anyway, at first — old habit — then stopped himself, hand on the porch rail, and sat back down, because his brother had never once asked him like that before, and it cost him something to refuse it.

"I don't know all of it," Mike said finally. "That's the truth I've never said out loud. I know you stopped eating. I know you said her name in your sleep for a month and none of us were allowed to tell you that afterward. I know Dad started the journals that same year, not before." He looked at the water. "I've spent twenty-six years deciding that not knowing the rest was a mercy. I don't actually know anymore whose mercy it was."

That question would not stay unanswered for long. Two days later, Marielle drove into town and spent an afternoon in the county records office, and came back with nothing — no death certificate, no burial record, no obituary for any child matching the name or year. She brought it to Mike directly.

"There's no grave, Uncle Mike. If she's real, where did they bury her?"

"Maybe some things don't end up in your neat little database."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I've got." He wouldn't look at her. "Not everything unrecorded is a mystery. Sometimes it's just a family being merciful to itself."

Not satisfied, Marielle spent the next day tracking down Corazon Villaruel, eighty-one, the maternity nurse at the county hospital the year the twins were born, still living forty minutes away. Mrs. Villaruel remembered Grace. She remembered Rey vaguely, as "the tall one who asked too many questions, even then." She did not remember delivering twins that year, though she allowed, honestly, that she'd delivered hundreds of babies across four decades. She looked at the photocopied birth record and went quiet longer than politeness required.

"That's not my signature," she said finally. "It's in my space. It isn't my hand." She turned the page toward the window light. "Someone either covered my shift and nobody told me, or somebody wanted it to look like I'd been there when I hadn't. Forty years is a long time to keep a thing like that straight. I'm sorry — I think you needed one answer, and I've just handed you a third."

She drove back with no confirmation, no denial, and a borrowed — or forged — signature where an honest one should have been. Mike's line came back to her whole: maybe some things don't end up in your neat little database. She had believed she was hunting for a missing record. She understood now she might be hunting for a record someone had gone to real trouble to make sure existed — which was not the same investigation at all.

Chapter Ten — What Mike Took

It was Lara who noticed the journal was missing — the one about the summer Reggie was sixteen, its rubber band a different color from the rest.

She found Mike behind the boathouse at dusk, a small fire going in a rusted burn barrel.

"That better not be what I think it is."

Mike didn't turn around. "You don't know what it is."

"I know what it was. I catalogued the box, Uncle Mike. Forty-one, then forty."

For a long moment neither of them said anything, the fire doing its small orange work, already past the point where anyone could pull anything whole back out of it.

"He doesn't need to read what happened to him at sixteen," Mike said finally, no certainty left in his voice. "I drove him to the hospital myself when he stopped eating. I am the only person left alive who watched what this family's curiosity did to him the first time, and I am not going to hand you all the instruction manual for doing it again."

"That wasn't yours to burn."

"No," he agreed, surprising her. "It wasn't. I did it anyway. I'll tell him myself, if it comes to that. I'm not going to lie to my brother's face. But I'm going to keep him from reading his own worst summer in our father's handwriting for as long as I possibly can."

Lara didn't tell Reggie that night. She told Marielle, in the dark, and the two of them argued in low voices about whether withholding this was its own kind of theft, and reached no agreement, and both decided to say nothing yet — the family's youngest generation keeping its first secret, the same species of mercy their elders had been practicing for forty years.

Chapter Eleven — Mocha's Photographs

Mocha had a system, and the system had a purpose, and the purpose, if anyone had ever asked her directly, was mercy.

She had been fourteen the year it happened — old enough to understand, young enough to be handed a task instead of a truth — sitting at the kitchen table one autumn afternoon with a box of family photographs and a pair of nail scissors, trimming a small girl in an amber-gold dress out of every picture where she appeared, so Grace would never have to see her again at the breakfast table, at the lake, at Christmas.

She had kept the scraps. You do not spend an afternoon cutting your sister out of your family's memory and then throw away the pieces.

She found Marielle in the hallway studying the ghost-rectangle behind the brass frame, and stood beside her without speaking, then said, "You found the mark."

"There was a bigger picture there once."

"There was a lot of things there once." Mocha's hands, reaching up to touch the frame, were shaking, though her voice stayed level with the discipline of someone who'd been holding it level for forty years. "I have the pieces, sweetheart. I never told your father. I never told anyone."

"Can I see them?"

Mocha looked at her — this bright, relentless girl who was so much like Rey it hurt sometimes — and made a decision she'd been circling for forty years.

"Come with me," she said.

Chapter Twelve — The Box of Scraps

The scraps lived in a hatbox in Mocha's old childhood room, still preserved as a guest room, still smelling faintly of rosewater. Marielle sat on the twin bed and watched her great-aunt lay the pieces out on the quilt like a woman setting a table for a meal she'd been dreading for decades.

Fragments of a girl. A shoe. A braid. A hand caught mid-wave. A whole face, once, torn cleanly from a Christmas photo.

"She drowned," Mocha said, the words flat, rehearsed a thousand times and never once spoken. "In the lake. Her and Reggie went out past where they were allowed, the summer they were seven. Only one of them came back to the dock."

"Why doesn't Dad remember?"

"Because it isn't the same thing that happened to the rest of us, and I am tired of watching this family talk about it like it is." Mocha smoothed a fragment flat against the quilt. "Your father forgot her. Genuinely. His mind did something to itself at seven that none of the rest of us know the shape of. That's not the same as what happened to Mike, who remembered pieces his whole childhood and let everyone convince him he'd imagined a friend who saved him bread. And it's nothing at all like what happened to me, or your grandmother." Her eyes were dry, which was somehow worse than tears. "We never forgot one day of it. We just stopped saying her name, which is a different thing, and a crueler one, because forgetting at least stops hurting eventually. Silence just sits there. Forty years, and it never once got lighter. Only quieter."

"That's so much worse than I thought."

"Everyone in this house has been carrying the same nine words for forty years and calling it the same grief, and it isn't. Your father carries a grief he can't locate. Mike carries a memory he doesn't trust. I carry a guilt no one ever let me put down, because putting it down would have meant saying her name, and saying her name would have meant watching your grandmother's face do the thing it did tonight at the garden. I decided, at fourteen, with a pair of scissors in my hand, that I'd rather carry the guilt myself." Her voice broke, for the first time. "Nobody asked a fourteen-year-old if that was a fair trade. I made it anyway. I'd probably make it again."

Marielle picked up the fragment of the waving hand and held it against her own.

"Does Phoebe know she looks like her? In Grandpa's reel."

Mocha's silence was its own answer. "It wasn't yellow, that dress, not really," she added, folding one fragment back into the hatbox. "Sun-bleached is what made it look that way in the film. Started out more of a gold, almost amber. But nobody remembers a girl in an amber dress. Everyone remembers a girl in yellow." She paused. "I used to think that was the film's fault. Lately I'm not so sure it isn't ours."

Chapter Thirteen — The Storm

The storm came up fast off the lake on the fifth night, the kind that gives almost no warning beyond a sudden greenish weight to the air, and by the time anyone thought to bring in the porch furniture the rain was already sideways and the power had already begun its long, flickering surrender.

It went out fully at 9:40. They found flashlights. They lit candles. Grace, unbothered, said the storm reminded her of the summer everyone got sick, and no one asked her which summer.

It was twenty minutes into the outage that someone realized Phoebe was not in the room.

"She was right here," Marielle said, already moving.

They split up without discussing it — Mocha up the stairs, Lara sweeping her flashlight along the hallway baseboards, Reggie out onto the storm-lashed porch shouting into the dark, and Mike, down on his knees at the crawlspace door beneath the kitchen stairs, the one with the loose latch he'd fixed twice himself over the years, because some part of him had clocked, faster than anyone, exactly where a determined child chasing a runaway cat in a blackout would end up.

"Phoebe." His voice had none of its usual argument in it. "Are you down there."

A small, damp, entirely unbothered voice answered from the dark. "I'm okay! Mr. Whiskers went under here and I followed him and now I can't find the way I came in, and also I think I found something."

Mike didn't wait for permission. He wrenched the door open and went in after her on his stomach, flashlight in his teeth, out of sight for one long minute and back with his niece dragged out by the ankle, Mr. Whiskers trotting out indignantly behind them both, entirely unbothered.

The whole family converged in the kitchen candlelight, Phoebe soaked in cobweb and delighted with herself, Mike shaking in a way he would deny completely the next morning, holding his niece against his chest so hard she complained about it.

"You can't do that," he said into her wet hair. "Not this week. Not any week."

"I found something," Phoebe said, entirely undeterred, and held out her fist.

It was a small tin, rusted nearly through, wedged for decades between two support beams where the storm runoff had finally shifted enough dirt to work it loose. Inside, wrapped in a scrap of stiffened oilcloth, was a child's hair ribbon — faded, but unmistakably amber-gold rather than yellow — a single brass button matching nothing else in the house, and a torn corner of paper with three words in a child's uneven, proud handwriting:

THIS IS REA—

The word broke off exactly where the paper tore, the same way Rey's own sentence had broken off on his desk the morning he died.

No one spoke for a long moment. The storm went on hammering the roof, entirely indifferent.

"Nobody found this by looking for it," Marielle said finally, quietly. "It took a storm and a cat and Phoebe being exactly the kind of seven-year-old who'd follow a cat into a crawlspace at night."

"Maybe that's the only way this house was ever going to let it out," Lara said. "Not by us going looking. By something knocking loose on its own."

Mike, still holding Phoebe, looked at the ribbon a long time. "I need everyone in this house accounted for from now on before it gets dark. That's not up for negotiation." Nobody argued.

"That could be anybody's ribbon," he added, not unkindly, once Phoebe had been set down. "Contractor's kid. Dad had half the county in and out of this crawlspace over the years." Nobody answered right away, and he didn't seem to need them to. Marielle noted, privately, that he wasn't entirely wrong. A ribbon proved a ribbon. It did not, on its own, prove a sister.

The power came back at eleven. The tin stayed on the kitchen table until morning, nobody quite willing to be the one who moved it.

PART FOUR — ECHO SOUL

Chapter Fourteen — Phoebe's Dream

Phoebe had never once in her seven years found the boundary between a dream and a memory, and no one had thought to teach her one, because it had never seemed to matter — until, in this house, it did.

She told her mother over the phone that night: "I had a dream I was a girl in a yellow dress and I was in the water and it wasn't scary, it was warm, and there was a boy calling my name except my name in the dream wasn't Phoebe."

"What was it, baby?"

"I don't remember. But when I woke up I was really sad, and I don't know why, because in the dream I wasn't sad at all. The boy was sad. I could feel that he was sad even though I was the one under the water." She considered this with grave seriousness. "Is it possible to be sad for someone else's sad, Mommy?"

Her mother, unaware of any of the week's discoveries, laughed gently and said something about empathy, and told her to go find her sisters and get some fresh air.

Phoebe did not mention that she had woken up with sand between her toes, though the nearest actual sand was eleven miles away.

She did tell Marielle, two days later, something she hadn't told her mother: "I don't think it's always the same girl in the dream, Mari. Sometimes she's sad about the water. Last night she wasn't sad at all. Last night she was mad that nobody set her a plate."

Marielle wrote that down too, and did not know, and would never fully know, whether she'd just been handed evidence or a seven-year-old's improvisation on a theme the whole house had been performing around her all week.

Then Phoebe lost interest entirely and asked whether they could go see if the tire swing still worked, because Lara had bet her it would snap, and spent the next hour proving her wrong, shrieking with uncomplicated joy every time the rope groaned.

Chapter Fifteen — The Ordinary Tuesday

Grace had a good day on Tuesday, and everyone recognized it within the first five minutes the way you recognize good weather before you've looked at the sky.

"I'm making the bibingka," she announced, tying an apron over her church dress, "and I need three assistants who can follow directions, which rules out your uncle, who has never once in fifty years followed a recipe he didn't consider a personal insult to his own judgment."

"I heard that," Mike called from the next room.

"You were meant to."

It became, without anyone planning it, the best hour of the visit. Grace put Phoebe in charge of the banana leaves, which meant Phoebe narrated an elaborate and entirely fictional history of each one. She put Lara in charge of the rice flour, which Lara took with the same grave focus she brought to a sketch, leveling every cup with the flat of a knife until Grace laughed and told her the batter would forgive a little imprecision — that was the whole secret of cooking for a big family. She put Marielle in charge of nothing at all, on the theory that Marielle needed one hour of her week where she wasn't in charge of anything.

"You've been standing guard over this whole family since you were about nine," Grace said, handing her a spoon anyway, for something to hold. "I watched your father do the same thing at your age. Today you don't have to hold anything up. Just stir if you feel like it."

Mike wandered in twenty minutes later, unable to stay away from the smell, and was conscripted into fanning the charcoal with far more competitive intensity than it required. By the time the first batch came out — slightly too dark on one side, which Grace declared "the good side, that's the side with the character" — the kitchen smelled like brown sugar and burnt leaf, and Phoebe announced she wanted to live in this exact kitchen forever, which nobody bothered to correct.

Reggie found them there an hour later, flour on Grace's cheek, Phoebe narrating leaves to an audience that had stopped listening and didn't mind, and stood in the doorway just watching it.

"Sit down, Reggie," Grace said, without turning around. "You've got that look."

"What look."

"The one where you think you're supposed to be doing something instead of eating."

He sat. He ate. Nobody mentioned a name that afternoon, and nobody needed to.

Chapter Sixteen — The Borrowed Grief

Lara found Reggie in the boathouse two days later, sorting through a decades-old tackle box, and sat on an overturned bucket. "Dad, do you ever feel sad for no reason? Like grief that isn't attached to anything you can point at?"

Reggie's hands stilled. "All the time. Since I was young. Waves of it. My therapist in my twenties called it free-floating. Said plenty of people carry it, usually from something early they can't access anymore."

"What if it's not free-floating," Lara said carefully. "What if it's someone else's, and you're just the one holding it because she can't anymore."

"That's not how grief works," he said, softly, like a man reciting a rule he'd stopped fully believing.

"Isn't it, though? Twins share a placenta, Dad. Maybe some of that sharing doesn't end just because one of you—"

He finished it for her, quiet. "Just because one of you drowned." He paused. "Last spring, before Dad died, I stood in my kitchen at home and felt grief so total I had to sit on the floor. I checked the date afterward. It was the anniversary of a hospital renovation I'd read about that morning. I have no idea why that grief arrived on that day. It still hasn't left all the way."

"Can I say something you're not going to like."

"When has that ever stopped you."

"What if it's not her grief at all. What if it's yours, and you've never once let yourself feel it as yours, because feeling it as yours means admitting you were there. In the water. That it happened to you too." She turned the tackle box lure over in her fingers, not looking at him. "It's easier to believe you're carrying somebody else's sadness than to believe you're finally, forty years late, carrying your own."

He didn't answer that one for a long moment. "Maybe both things are true, Lara. Maybe I don't get to know which."

She almost told him, then, about the acceptance letter still folded in her sketchbook — the way it felt like its own small grief she hadn't earned the right to feel yet, not this week, not in a house already this full. She didn't. Some griefs, she was learning, had to wait their turn.

Chapter Seventeen — Lara's Sketchbook

That night Lara filled eleven pages without letting herself think about what her hand was doing. Every page had water in it, and two children, and somewhere around page seven the two children became one child and a shadow, the shadow rendered in charcoal so heavy it had torn through the paper.

On page eleven, she drew the study — the projector, the reel canister — and beside it, faint, almost erased before she'd fully committed it, a second man standing where only Rey should have been standing.

She photographed every page, timestamps stacking up like a woman building a case file she didn't want to admit she was building. She would look at those photographs again on the last night and find, on page four, a window she was almost certain she'd drawn on the west wall of the study, now rendered on the east.

She showed no one, not even Marielle. She closed the sketchbook, turned off the lamp, and lay in the dark listening to Phoebe breathe in the other bed. Before she slept, she took the acceptance letter out one more time, read the first line for the fifth or sixth time that week, and put it back, unanswered, in the same pocket where she kept everything else she hadn't decided what to do with yet.

Interlude — Three Defenses

Three people in this house had, by the third day, quietly built a case for why none of this was real, and it is worth saying plainly what each defense actually was, because none of them were foolish, and none of them were cowardly, and all three came from love.

Mike's defense was structural. He had watched a boy stop eating once, and had driven that boy to a hospital himself, and had been told by a doctor that the kindest thing anyone could do was let a closed door stay closed. He had built twenty-six years of peace on top of that door. A family does not dismantle a load-bearing wall because a child found a ribbon in a crawlspace. He was not protecting a lie. He was protecting the only architecture he'd ever found that let his brother stand upright.

Marielle's defense was procedural. She did not disbelieve in Real. She disbelieved in conclusions that arrived before their evidence did. Two contradicting documents were not a ghost story to her; they were an unfinished chain of custody. She would have said, if anyone had asked her directly, that she wanted this to be true more than she had wanted almost anything in her life, and that wanting it was exactly why she refused to let herself decide it yet.

Grace's defense was the strangest, and the truest, and none of the others recognized it as a defense at all: she had simply stopped needing anyone else to agree with her. Whether that was the clarity of grief finally given permission, or the mercy of a mind that had already let go of needing witnesses, no one in that house would ever be equipped to say. She was

not trying to convince them. She had stopped, some years ago, keeping score of who believed her.

Three defenses, none of them wrong, all of them aimed at the same undefended place. The house did not care which one won. It went on keeping its own contradictions regardless, the way it always had.

PART FIVE — JUMP

Chapter Eighteen — The Accident

It came back to Reggie the way drowning itself is said to come back to those who survive it — not as a story but as a body sensation first, a tightness behind the sternum, a taste of lake water at the back of the throat with no business being there thirty-nine years later.

He had chosen, without deciding to, the same three planks at the end of the dock he'd been choosing all week, one hand resting on the weathered cleat, when it arrived whole: the raft they weren't supposed to take past the yellow buoy, though which of them had suggested it first he could no longer say. Real's laugh, too loud, daring him further, or perhaps daring herself. The flip almost gentle in the memory — no violence in it, just a slow rotation, the sky trading places with the water. Coming up gasping. Looking for the dress. Not finding it. Diving once, twice, the panic arriving late the way it does in children. Surfacing the third time with his hand closed around nothing but water, and finding, to his own eternal shame, that some animal part of him swam for the dock anyway, because his body had decided to live before his heart had agreed to.

He had been seven years old. No seven-year-old should carry a decision like that. But the body doesn't ask permission, and the boy had grown into a man who spent four decades not remembering — which he understood now was not the absence of grief but its most complete expression, grief so total it had eaten its own evidence.

He sat down hard on the dock boards, not because his legs gave out, but because standing suddenly felt like an unreasonable thing to ask of himself.

Chapter Nineteen — Reggie's Confession

He gathered his daughters himself, that night, at the kitchen table — did not wait to be asked, did not wait for Mike or Mocha to find out first and soften it for him. He wanted, for once, to be the one who decided how this got said.

He told them about the raft. The buoy. The third dive and what his hand found and did not find. He told them, voice breaking, about swimming for the dock, about the years of mono, about a summer at sixteen he still could not fully account for, about a grief so old it had stopped feeling like grief and started feeling like simply the shape of him.

Marielle cried without trying to manage it. Lara sat very still, the way she did when a pattern finally resolved into a picture — though she found she trusted this picture less, not more, for having resolved. Phoebe climbed into her father's lap and put both hands on his face. "It's okay, Daddy. She's not mad at you. She just wants you to stop swimming away from her."

Mike, arriving late, caught only the tail end and did not let it stand the way the room wanted it to.

"Don't," he said, sharp. "Don't do that to a seven-year-old's imagination, Phoebe, and don't do that to yourself, Reg. Kids repeat things they overhear." His hands were shaking. "I remember driving you to that hospital myself, twenty-two years old, scared out of my mind, and a doctor telling me your brother's mind found a very effective way to protect itself and the kindest thing you can do is not go looking for the door back in. I have spent twenty-six years being the one person who didn't go looking.

And now I'm watching my nieces hand you a flashlight." He wiped his face, furious at his own tears. "I am not the villain for wanting that door to stay shut. I just love you in a way that doesn't photograph as well as theirs does."

No one had an answer for that. It sat there, true and unresolved, next to the confession, next to Phoebe's small devastating certainty — two different kinds of love pointed at each other across a kitchen table, and for once nobody moved to referee it.

Chapter Twenty — The Vault

The last journal was not in the tin box. It was in the projector cart itself, in a hidden compartment beneath the reel spindle — and it was Reggie, not Marielle, who found it, on his knees on the study floor at midnight, because he had decided, after the confession, that if there was one more thing in this house that knew more about his own life than he did, he was going to be the one who found it.

The journal was labeled, in Rey's careful older hand: For whoever finally asks the right question.

I was not a scientist studying memory out of pure curiosity. I became obsessed with how memory forms and fails because I needed to understand how my son's mind had managed to lose an entire summer, and whether that same mercy could be extended to the rest of us. Grace remembers Real more clearly with each year she loses of everything else, and I have come to believe — though I cannot prove it — that some memories do not fade because they are unimportant. They fade because we ask them to. And some refuse to go. Whoever is reading this: be gentle with Reggie. He did not do anything wrong. He was seven. The lake decided, not him.

It was the first time in this entire visit that a document had told Reggie something and left him more settled instead of less. He almost stopped there.

But tucked behind that page, in a different pen, a shade bluer, the hand less steady, was a second entry that had not been meant to sit beside the first:

Reread the above tonight and could not sign my own name under it with

a clear conscience. A researcher does not get to believe the kinder

hypothesis just because it is kinder. I have built forty years of

study on the assumption that Real existed and was lost. I have never

once let myself seriously test the alternative: that a grieving young

father, unable to explain a summer he could not account for, and a

grieving young mother, unable to bear a childless quiet, together

constructed a story sturdy enough to live inside. I do not think that

is what happened. I want to be honest that I do not think it, more

than I can prove it isn't. I am running out of time to decide whether

it matters to me.

Reggie read both entries three times. He did not bring the second one upstairs that night. He sat with it alone a while longer, and did not know, in the end, which entry his father had believed on the day he died — or whether a man could hold both at once and call that living.

PART SIX — NPC

Chapter Twenty-One — The Fourth Chair

That night, for the first time since they'd arrived, Mocha set the table for six.

No one said anything about it. No one moved the extra plate.

"She used to sit there," Grace said, into the quiet, nodding at the empty chair. "Hated peas. Loved anything with cinnamon. Told the worst jokes and laughed at them longer than anyone else did, which somehow made them funnier."

"Ma," Reggie said, and his voice had a new gentleness in it. "Tell us more about her."

And Grace did — for two hours, lucid in a way the disease hadn't allowed in over a year. A girl fierce, funny, afraid of thunder, unafraid of everything else, prone to nicknames that stuck for life — the one who had nicknamed her twin brother "Reg" because "Reginald" took too long to say when you were excited, which, Grace said, laughing, he almost always was.

Phoebe laughed too hard at that one and knocked her water glass over doing it, and for one entire ridiculous minute the table dissolved into napkins and Mocha barking about the good tablecloth — exactly the kind of small domestic disaster that had nothing to do with any of it, and everything to do with why they'd all kept coming back to this house.

Mike did not laugh with them. "Ma, you also told me, when I was nine, that Grandpa Alon fought in a war he never served in. You told Reggie a story for years about a dog we never had. I'm not saying you're lying. I'm saying I've watched you build beautiful, sincere memories out of things

that never happened, and I don't know how we're supposed to tell the difference this time, just because we all want it to be true."

The table went silent. It was the most honest thing anyone had said all week, and also the cruelest.

Grace didn't flinch. "You're right to ask that, Michael. I don't have a way to prove it to you. I've never once had a way to prove any of my own memories to anyone, my whole life, and neither have you, and neither will your nieces, one day. That's not a flaw in me. That's just what remembering is, for everybody. You're asking me for something nobody's grandmother has ever been able to give anybody. I can only tell you what I carry. I can't hand you the receipt."

Mike had no answer for that, and did not apologize, and sat through the rest of dinner in a silence that was neither surrender nor victory. Phoebe listened to all of it with her chin in her hands, entirely unsurprised, and asked whether there was more bibingka.

Chapter Twenty-Two — Grace's Impossible Memory

It was near midnight when Grace pulled Phoebe aside, just the two of them on the porch.

"You don't have to keep carrying her feelings for her, sweetheart," Grace said, holding both of Phoebe's small hands in her own. "She's not lost. She was just waiting for someone to finally say her name at the table again."

"How do you know?" Phoebe asked, seven and entirely serious.

Grace smiled the smile she'd worn the night Rey died. "Because I've been talking to her every day for forty years, baby. I just stopped being able to hold onto everything else instead, and nobody ever tells you that's a trade the heart sometimes makes on its own."

Whether this was the plain confession of a grieving mother still fluent in her daughter's voice, or something none of them would ever be equipped to explain, no one on that porch would ever agree.

Chapter Twenty-Three — The Name No One Says

Mike came to the porch last, after Grace had gone to bed, and stood in the doorway a long while before he could make himself speak.

"I remembered something too. Just now, in the kitchen. I was five. There was a girl at the table who used to save me the last piece of bread even when she wanted it more than I did." He wiped his face roughly. "I've spent forty years thinking I imagined an invisible friend, because that's what everyone told me I did."

He frowned. "There used to be a door at the end of that hallway. Off the kitchen. Mocha, you remember that door?"

Mocha, in the kitchen doorway with a dish towel still in her hands, went very still. "There's no door there, Mike. There's never been a door there. It's a wall."

"I know there's a wall now. I'm asking if you remember a door."

"I remember a door," she said, her voice thinner than either of them liked. "I don't remember it ever being sealed up. I checked, years ago. It's easier to let a door go than to ask a house to explain itself."

"Say the thing you said to Marielle," Reggie said quietly, from the hall. "Mike needs to hear it too."

Mocha looked at her brother a long moment, and then said it, plainly: "Your father forgot her, Mike. Genuinely, at seven, in a way none of the rest of us experienced. You remembered pieces your whole life and let people talk you out of trusting them, which is its own loss, but not the same one.

Your mother and I never had the mercy of forgetting a single day of it. We just stopped saying her name, which felt like the same thing as forgetting, and never once was. Reggie carries grief without a memory to hang it on. You carry a memory you've been told isn't real. I carry a guilt that never had anywhere to go. Three different kinds of drowning, Michael. I am so tired of this family treating them like the same one."

Mike said nothing for a long time. "I didn't know it was different for you. Forty years down the hall, and I didn't know that."

"You never asked," Mocha said, not unkindly. "None of you did. I made it very easy not to."

Reggie put a hand on his brother's shoulder. "She was real, Mike. We just needed the whole family in the room at once before any of us could say so — and I think we needed to stop pretending we'd all lost the same thing, too."

Mike didn't fully agree, not out loud, not that night — and the family let him not agree, which was, in its own way, the truest sign of how far they'd come.

Chapter Twenty-Four — What Lara Finally Draws

On the second-to-last night, Lara did something she hadn't done all week: she asked someone to look.

She found Marielle in the room they'd been sharing since the funeral and handed over the sketchbook — all of it, every page, from the pond sketch that first sprouted a second child to the study drawing with its second man standing where only Rey should stand.

"I need you to tell me if you see what I see," Lara said, "because I've stopped trusting my own hand, and I think that's the actual problem. Not the drawings. Me."

Marielle went through them slowly, saying nothing until the last one — new, done that evening, that Lara hadn't shown anyone yet. The whole family in quick confident lines: Reggie, Mike, Mocha, Grace, the three sisters, gathered around a table with six chairs, one empty, and beside it, faint, not erased this time — a girl, distinct, looking directly out of the page.

"You drew her looking at us."

"I drew her looking at me." Lara sat down hard on the edge of the bed. "I've spent this whole week acting like I'm the one who notices things other people miss. The stride count. The plate count. The window on the wrong wall. I catalogue. I've always catalogued. I thought that was just — how I am." She laughed, short and not entirely happy. "When Mom and Dad split when I was nine, I started keeping lists. Everything in the house, everywhere it belonged. I told myself I liked order. It was because I was

terrified something else was going to go missing and nobody would notice until it was too late. I've called that a personality trait my entire life."

She reached into the sketchbook's back pocket and took out the acceptance letter, finally, and set it on the quilt between them. "I've had this a week. I haven't told anyone. It's a program in the fall. I'd have to leave for it in August, and some part of me has been treating that like its own kind of drowning — like if I go, I lose track of everyone here, the way this family lost track of her." She looked at the drawing. "This house didn't do that to me. It just showed it to me."

Marielle put an arm around her sister and did not reach for a fact to steady the moment. "You're going," she said. "You've been keeping track of everyone else your whole life. Let somebody keep track of you for a change. I'll do it. Send the letter back tomorrow."

Lara didn't answer that. She didn't need to. She closed the sketchbook, and for the first time all week, did not reach to photograph the page.

PART SEVEN — THE LAST REEL

Chapter Twenty-Five — What the Projector Held

They gathered in the study on their last night at the house — all seven of them, Grace in Rey's old leather chair, the girls on the floor, Mike and Mocha and Reggie standing because there weren't enough chairs and none of them wanted to be the one who sat while the others stood.

Reggie had gone in an hour earlier, alone, and threaded the reel through himself, and sat with it dark and unplayed for a long while before he called the rest of them in — because after a week of things being found and told and taken from him, he wanted this one thing to be a choice he made on purpose, in his own time, before he shared it.

The girl in the amber-gold dress the family, out of long habit, still called yellow appeared, mid-laugh, exactly where the reel had always been expected to burn and stop.

It did not burn this time.

The film kept running. Real finished her laugh. She turned — not toward the boy off-camera, but toward the camera itself — and smiled, wide and unguarded, and said, clearly, on audio no one had known the reel possessed: "You finally remembered."

The reel cut to black.

"Did you hear that," Reggie said. "Did anyone else hear that."

Marielle had not. She said so gently. Mike had not either, and this time he did not reach for an explanation right away — he simply looked shaken. Lara said she'd heard something, though she would not commit, even to

herself, to calling it words. Phoebe said she'd heard it perfectly, the way she'd report the weather. Reggie played the reel through again.

The line was gone. Just the laugh, the turn, the two children at the water's edge, suspended forever at the last good second before anything could go wrong.

Grace, from the leather chair, was smiling. "She always did like getting the last word," she said. "Drove her brother crazy."

Chapter Twenty-Six — What the House Remembers

They held a small ceremony the next morning at the edge of the lake, the fig tree at their backs, the dock catching the day's first light — though Marielle would remark once, absently, that she'd always thought the dock faced the sunset, and Lara, just as quietly, said she remembered it running parallel to the water instead of out over it. No one corrected either of them, and no one agreed, and the moment passed the way small wrong things pass in a family too tired and too tender to chase down every one of them.

They said the name out loud, together, for what Mocha guessed was the first time since the funeral no child had been allowed to attend.

"Realyn."

Reggie scattered a small handful of Rey's ashes into the water, alongside a torn photograph fragment Mocha finally let go of, and the small tin from the crawlspace. Phoebe carried it down herself and would not let anyone else touch it, and when the moment came to let it go, Reggie reached in first, without a word, and lifted the ribbon out. He put it in his shirt pocket, over his heart, and let the empty tin go into the water alone. Nobody asked him about it. Marielle noticed. She did not write it down.

Phoebe, watching the tin sink, said, "I don't feel sad anymore. I feel like I said goodbye to somebody I always knew, but I never got to actually meet."

"That's exactly what it is, baby," Reggie said, and didn't try to explain further, because for the first time in his life he didn't need an explanation to sit comfortably beside a mystery.

Mike put an arm around his brother's shoulders — not because he'd been won over, entirely, but because some loves outlast the arguments they're built on. Mocha closed the empty hatbox for good, though she would keep it, unopened, on a closet shelf for the rest of her life. Grace, unprompted, began humming something none of them recognized.

The water gave nothing back except its own reflection, calm now, unbothered.

Epilogue — The Knock

Six months later, Reggie sat alone in what had become, by quiet family agreement, his study now.

He had taken to watching the last reel some evenings, not out of grief anymore but out of something closer to company. He never heard the voice again. He checked, every time.

There was a knock at the door.

He set down the reel canister and went to answer it.

He would tell his daughters, weeks afterward, that when he opened the door there was no one on the porch — just the fig tree moving in a wind that hadn't seemed to be blowing a moment before, just the ordinary dark of an ordinary night. He would also tell them, if they asked twice, which Phoebe always did, that for one half of one second he could have sworn he smelled cinnamon.

He never opened his father's journals again after that night. Some questions, he had come to understand, are not meant to be answered. They are meant to be carried, gently, by everyone who loved the person the question is about, until carrying them stops feeling like weight and starts feeling, at last, like company.

The reel, when Marielle checked it years later out of her own relentless need for evidence, still ended exactly where it always had — at the edge of the dock, two children forever about to jump, forever choosing, every single time the light passed through that rectangle of film, to jump together. She timed it once, on a whim, having found an old receipt of her

grandfather's listing the reel's original running length. It ran eleven seconds longer than the receipt claimed it should. She watched it twice more, decided the old receipt had probably been wrong, and filed the discrepancy in the same back pocket of her mind where she still kept a birth record and a discharge ledger that had never once agreed with each other, a journal count that had somehow become forty instead of forty-one, and a dress everyone in the family still called yellow though she privately thought of it as gold.

She had, by then, gone looking one final time for the piece of evidence that would settle it — the hospital's original master ledger, filed at the county archive under a records-retention policy she'd had to argue with a clerk for forty minutes to access. She found the page. The ink at the critical line — the one that would have told her, finally, which infant had been listed first — had been struck through and rewritten, decades ago, in a different, slightly bluer pen, the original entry beneath it too faded to recover even holding the page up to the window light. She could not tell, and no one alive could tell her, whether her father had been the older twin or the younger — or whether it had stopped mattering which name the world had given to which order, since the family itself had long since stopped keeping the difference as separate as a hospital ledger insisted a family should.

She did not go looking for an explanation after that. For the first time in her life, she let a piece of evidence simply sit there, unresolved, and found, to her own surprise, that she could still sleep that night.

Lara, for her part, kept the sketchbook, and went to the program in the fall, and came home for holidays with new pages full of other people's water, other people's rooms. She still drew two children more often than

one. But she had stopped photographing every page the moment she finished it, and started, instead, simply signing her name at the bottom and dating it, the way an artist does when she has finally decided a piece of work is allowed to be finished — imperfect, unverified, hers.

Somewhere in a house that had quietly decided it was no longer finished being lived in, a family kept a sixth chair at the table sometimes, and did not always explain why to the guests who asked, and had, at last, stopped needing to.

A Note on This Story

Every contradiction in this book was placed there on purpose. The strides in the hallway, the plates at the table, the color of a dress, the running time of a reel, the order of a set of twins — none of them are errors, and none of them are meant to be solved so much as carried, the way this family finally learned to carry them. If something here troubled you the first time through, it may be worth troubling you again. The house was never going to explain itself. It was only ever going to let you sit in it a while, with people who loved each other imperfectly, and see what you noticed.